SPECIAL REPORT NOVE

JFK

CASE CLOSED

President John F. Kennedy was killed 30 years ago. After three decades of conspiracy theories, a brilliant new book published this week claims proof that Lee Harvey Oswald (left) was the lone gunman. In this special issue, we shatter some of the conspiracy myths and investigate the lucrative assassination business.

INTRODUCTION

M B E R 2 2 1 9 6 3

9/4/93

The Courier-Mail
WEEKEND

SATURDAY COLOUR MAGAZINE ... PLUS MOVIES, BOOKS AND

DEALEY PLAZA, DALLAS, NOVEMBER 22, 1963: The roar of the crowd . . . the flicker of an 8mm home-movie camera . . . the wave, followed by the crack of gunfire . . . the splatter of blood and brain matter . . .

The murder of John F. Kennedy reruns in the nation's collective consciousness like a horror show that never closes. Seven out of 10 Americans think a nameless, craftily concealed conspiracy did Kennedy in — and why wouldn't they? For three decades, harum-scarum conspiracy theories have come not as single spies but in battalions, marching at us out of 200 books and a Hollywood blockbuster. Saturnine superpatriots, bearded Marxists, vengeful mafiosi, power-mad bureaucrats, ticked-off generals, burnt-out spooks — the suspects stretch to the horizon.

Ten new assassination books arrive on the eve of the slaying's 30th anniversary: 10 books with a smell about them, including one with the smell of truth. That book is Gerald Posner's *Case Closed*, published this week by Random House in America. A 39-year-old lawyer turned writer (his credits include co-authoring the acclaimed biography *Mengele: The Complete Story* 1986), Posner achieves the unprecedented. He sweeps away decades of polemical smoke, layer by layer, and builds a seemingly unshakable case against JFK's killer.

To do this, he had to fully reappraise a massive evidentiary record, plunging in without a clue as to where or when he would come out. He reindexed all 26 volumes of Warren Commission testimony and the 1979 report of the House Select Committee on Assassinations and cross-referenced material in hundreds of books and articles.

Then, to fill gaps not bridged by his labyrinth of 3-by-5 cards, he did more than 200 interviews of his own. His conclusion? Yes, Lee Harvey Oswald — the pathetic "patsy" of so many conspiracy scenarios, the putative fall-guy of the much maligned Warren Commission — gunned down Kennedy. And yes, he acted alone.

Americans determined to disbelieve this thesis may be beyond persuasion. But readers who follow Posner's analysis with an open mind will have their eyes opened in new ways. The Warren Commission correctly identified Oswald as the killer but filed a brief against him that was hobbled by mistakes and unanswered questions. Posner now performs the historic office of correcting the mistakes and laying the questions to rest with impressive finality, bringing the total weight of evidence into focus more sharply than anyone has done before.

TOUR DE FORCE. The central issue raised by the physical evidence has always been whether a single bullet could pass through Kennedy's upper back and also cause the wounds suffered by Texas Governor John Connally. The two men were struck almost simultaneously. If a different bullet hit Connally, only a second gunman could have fired it. Posner demonstrates computerised re-enactments, special enhancements of the home movie by Dallas dressmaker Abraham Zapruder, new bullet-impact tests and medical expertise to prove the single-bullet theory beyond a reasonable doubt.

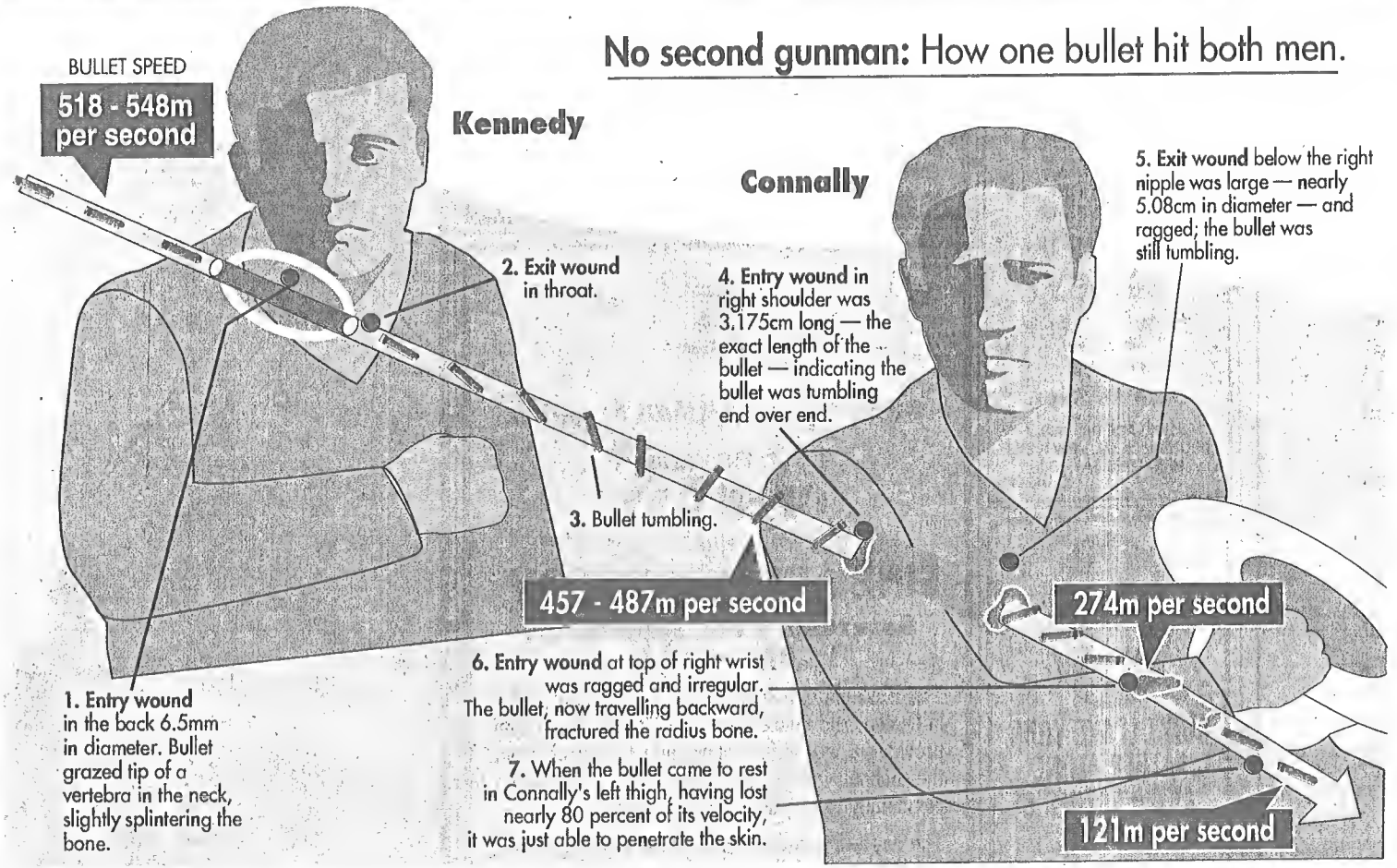
"The chapter on the single bullet is a tour de force, absolutely brilliant, absolutely convincing," says Stephen Ambrose, the distinguished biographer of Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon, who was previously a strong single-bullet sceptic. *Case Closed* demolishes another cause celebre among conspiracy theorists: contradictions between how the treating physicians at Parkland Hospital and the autopsy doctors described Kennedy's wounds.

Exit wound or entrance wound? Big or small? High or low? Warren Commission critics have treated the discrepancies as proof that the body was tampered with to obscure the presence of a gunman or gunmen who fired from the Grassy Knoll, on Kennedy's right, while Oswald (or someone else) fired from the Texas School Book Depository behind the President.

But when Posner himself interviewed the Parkland doctors, all but one agreed with the autopsy findings, conceding that their original observations, made hastily under great stress, had been incomplete, partially incorrect or subsequently distorted by conspiracy writers.

Conspiracists have also long believed that if they could get a look inside Oswald's KGB file, it might well show he was a Soviet agent. *Case Closed* not only examines that file but reports the author's interview with Yuri Nosenko —

SHATTERED MYTH: THE MAGIC BULLET



the first ever exclusively devoted to the former KGB officer's supervision of the Oswald case.

Both confirm that Oswald was not only not an agent but was deemed totally untrustworthy by the spy agency. Previously undisclosed files cited by Posner also play havoc with the romanticised portrait of New Orleans district attorney Jim Garrison that director Oliver Stone presents in his 1991 film *JFK*. The files (of Garrison's own investigators) buttress an earlier generation's verdict that Garrison's chaotic assassination prosecution twisted the truth with cynical abandon.

CONSPIRACY. On issue after issue, Posner catches Stone and the major conspiracy writers in serious misrepresentations of the evidence. The high quotients of commonsense, logic and scrupulous documentation found in *Case Closed* are niceties not often found in the field of assassination studies.

One book entitled *Is President John F. Kennedy Alive — and Well?* has run through 15 editions. Another book, *Best Evidence*, made the bestseller lists in 1981 with its theory that on the flight back to Washington, Kennedy's body was stolen from his casket right from under the eyes of the First Lady and presidential aides and surgically altered to disguise wounds made by a second gunman.

The author, David Lifton, who is at work on yet another conspiracy book, has spent his adult life trying to unmask the JFK plotters. In the mid-1960s he did photo enhancements of shrubbery on the Grassy Knoll and thought he could discern a man with a periscope, a man with a machinegun, another with an electronic headset, still another wearing a Kaiser Wilhelm helmet, and a galoot who was either Douglas MacArthur or the general's dead ringer.

The conspiracy writers are fed by a network of amateur sleuths who keep vast files of clippings in their basements and troll for fresh witnesses who all too often have found their tongues after half a lifetime of terrified silence. By one count, 30 men have been identified by buffs as "the second gunman" or have themselves "confessed" to firing shots at Kennedy, usually from the Grassy Knoll.

The quest for Kennedy's killers long ago became the domain of both hobbyists and profiteers. A for-profit JFK Assassination Information Center prospers in Dallas by selling bumper stickers, T-shirts and other murder memorabilia and charging people $4 to view its exhibits. Conspiracy buffs meet for three days each year in Dallas to swap theories, attend seminars on such topics as "Media Coverup — Then and Now" and welcome star conspiracy "witnesses", who sign autographs like rock stars. Assassination artefacts can be big moneymakers. Jack Ruby's gun went for $200,000 at auction last year; the new owner offers 5000 "limited-edition" bullets shot from it for $500 each. Character assassination of the dead and group libel can be even more lucrative. Warner Bros' *JFK*, a heavily fictionalised film starring Earl Warren, Lyndon Johnson, the CIA and the FBI, has grossed $196.5 million worldwide.

DEADLY SMIRK. Every presidential assassination and every war in US history has spawned suggestions of secret plots and hidden agendas, but never before have the conspiracy alarms sounded so loud so long. Jack Ruby's shooting of Oswald on live television only 48 hours after his arrest stirred visceral suspicions that were only deepened by the troubled epoch that followed — the calamity of Vietnam, the social turmoil of the late 60s, Watergate and the disillusionments of the 70s.

JFK's murder came to be remembered as a loss of national innocence, which served to magnify the appeal of conspiracy scenarios. A single individual might murder a man, but a whole era? Many people want a more formidable set of villains.

"If you put 6 million dead Jews on one side of a scale and on the other side put the Nazi regime ... you have a rough balance: greatest crime, greatest criminals," historian William Manchester has written. "But if you put the murdered President of the United States on one side of a scale and that wretched waif Oswald on the other side, it doesn't balance. You want to add something weightier to Oswald. It would invest the President's death with meaning, endowing him with martyrdom. He would have died for something. A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely."

Posner puts Oswald at the centre of the action by establishing who he really was and what he really did on November 22.

Continued WEEKEND 4

From WEEKEND 1

CASE CLOSED

Who was Oswald? How strange that the question is still being asked a generation after he himself answered it so vividly upon his arrest.

His lips denied his crime but his face affirmed it. The faint smirk he wore both betrayed his guilt and celebrated it. It bespoke a tormented loner with an attitude too monumental to be concealed even when self-preservation demanded it. That attitude had shown itself many times before — in a small child who hurled rocks at other children; in a 13-year-old who was asked whether he preferred the company of boys or girls and replied: "I dislike everybody"; in a 15-year-old who became a Marxist and refused to salute the flag in school, and who as an adult wrote of himself: "Lee Harvey Oswald was born in Oct 1939 in New Orleans, La. the son of a Insuraen (sic) Salesman whose early death left a far mean streak of indepence (sic) brought on by negleck (sic)."

A psychiatrist who examined Oswald in early adolescence found he had a "vivid fantasy life, turning around the topics of omnipotence and power", and from the mass of evidence adduced by Posner, there seems little doubt that Oswald dwelt in a parallel universe all his own. In it, he was always a hero aborning, a man on the verge of being recognised for his high intelligence and unique talent — first by the Marine Corps, in which he enlisted at age 17; then by the Soviet Union, to which he defected, and then by the Cubans, whom he sought to join in their revolutionary struggles.

In the real world, each of these imagined utopias mocked his megalomaniac expectations. The Marines ridiculed him as "Ozzie Rabbit" for his reclusiveness and twice court-martialed him for misbehaviour. The Soviets packed him off to Minsk to labour as a lowly sheet-metal worker until he returned to America in disgust.

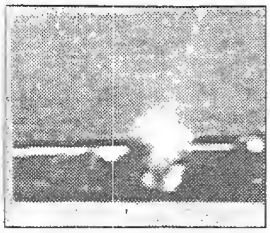
The Cubans gave him the bum's rush as a strange bird whose erratic migrations held no charm for them. In his private universe, Oswald was a dutiful husband; and in the real world, he regularly beat his Russian-born wife, Marina, for such offences as failing to draw his bath. She fought back by insulting his manhood. In Oswald's mind, he was a born spy with a flair for operating sub rosa against the forces of fascism; in truth, he chose his aliases, false addresses and other superspook affectations by reading a book, *How to Be a Spy*, that graced his coffee table.

US leftists, like their foreign counterparts, viewed him as too weird to be trusted. The tension between Oswald's fantasies and his no-account life sought release in violence. By the spring of 1963, he had carefully cased the home of retired Maj-Gen Edwin Walker, a prominent right-winger living in Dallas, and sent off by mail for a 6.5mm Mannlicher-Carcano rifle (the same rifle that would kill John Kennedy). He posed with it in his backyard while Marina snapped a now-famous photograph. The caption, apparently in Marina's hand, read: "Hunter of fascists. Ha, ha, ha." One evening, he took his rifle, crept close to Walker's house and fired at him in his den. The bullet was deflected by the window frame, saving Walker's life but deepening Oswald's despair.

By November, the 24-year-old Oswald had reached a new nadir. He had lost three low-paying jobs in a row and at the end of September had been refused a visa by Cuba after spending much of his meager savings to visit the Cuban Embassy in Mexico City to offer himself to "Uncle Fidel". Back in Dallas, he was desperate to reinflate his ego. What better than to play a delicious secret joke on all those who had spurned him — one that would demonstrate that he was a man wily enough to change the very course of history?

On November 19, the Dallas newspapers reported the route John Kennedy would follow during a visit to the city three days later. The presidential motorcade was to pass by the Texas School Book Depository, where Lee Harvey Oswald had recently found a job and could enter, no questions asked. Destiny bayed in his ears like the hound of hell.

Case Closed is published in the USA. Details of Australian publication are unavailable.



IMPACT: JFK's head snapped back.

MYTH: THE JET EFFECT

THREE bullets rained down on Kennedy. The first missed completely. The second — the so-called "magic bullet" described on WEEKEND 1 — passed through Kennedy and Governor Connally. The third shattered the President's head, killing him. As the third bullet hit, the President's head can be seen on Abraham Zapruder's home movie, jerking violently backwards.

Conspiracy buffs see this as confirmation that the third bullet came from the front (from a second gunman on the Grassy Knoll) and not, as in the case of the other bullets, from the rear (from lone gunman Oswald in the Texas School Book Depository). In fact, medical experts say it proves nothing of the kind. The backward movement is the result of two factors.

First, when the bullet destroyed the President's cortex, it caused a neuromuscular spasm that sent a massive discharge of neurologic impulses from the injured brain shooting down the spine to every muscle in Kennedy's body.

"The body then stiffens, with the strongest muscles predominating," says Dr John Lattimer, a New York surgeon with long expertise in the case. The muscles contract, lurching the body upward and to the rear.

Dr Luis Alvarez, a Nobel Prize-winning physicist, focused on that to discover the second factor that drove the President's head back with such force. Dubbed the "jet effect", Alvarez established it both through physical experiments that re-created the head shot and through extensive laboratory calculations.

He found that when the brain and blood tissue exploded out of JFK's head, it carried forward more momentum than was brought in by the bullet.

That caused the head to thrust backward — in an opposite direction — as a rocket does when its jet fuel is ejected.

MYTH: JACK RUBY

WHO was Jack Ruby? Conspiracy buffs portray him as a hit man enlisted by the Mob or some other murderous cabal to silence Lee Oswald before he implicated others.

It is a theory without a lick of actual evidence. The facts suggest that Ruby was no more than a luckless lout trying to play the hero. A former street brawler out of Chicago who was barely making ends meet as a nightclub owner, Ruby was notorious for his violent temper — and for his eagerness to please policemen, reporters and the Dallas establishment.

He spent half his time glad-handing and back-slapping — the other half throwing unruly customers or errant employees down the stairs at his Carousel Club.

Beset with financial troubles, he appeared on the verge of an emotional collapse after JFK's death. He closed his two nightclubs out of respect, wept openly and wailed that he and other Jews would be blamed because a strongly anti-Kennedy ad in a Dallas newspaper the day of the killing was signed with a Jewish name.

JACK RUBY: Police file photographs.

Two days later, Ruby happened to enter the basement of police headquarters just as Oswald was being taken out. Noticing "a smirk on his face" and thinking "why you little S.O.B." (as he told his brother Earl), he pulled out the gun he often carried and fired before anyone in the mob of reporters and policemen could stop him.

Ruby felt sure people would see him as a hero. "You guys couldn't do it," he told an assistant district attorney. "Someone had to do it." A lie-detector test supported his denials of premeditation. So did other circumstances.

On the evening of November 22, Ruby had made no move for the .38 calibre revolver in his hip pocket when he came within a couple of metres of Oswald at police headquarters.

Two days later, when he did shoot him, Ruby's beloved dog Sheba was outside in his car. Ruby was a solicitous master, always doting on his dogs, whom he called his "children".

Says former Dallas assistant district attorney Bill Alexander: "Ruby would never have taken that dog with him if he had known he was going to end up in jail. He would have made sure that dog was at home and well taken care of."

RUSSIAN DAYS: Oswald (in dark glasses) with fellow sheetmetal workers in Minsk.

MYTH: LEE AND THE KGB

"MY fondest dreams are shattered," Lee Oswald wrote in his diary on October 21, 1959, just after the Soviet Foreign Ministry denied his request for citizenship and ordered him to leave.

"I decide to end it. Soak rist (sic) in cold water to numb pain. Then slash my left wrist. Then plaug wrist into bathtub of hot water ... somewhere, a violin plays, as I watch my life whirl away."

Oswald was revived by blood transfusions. His suicide note, left on his hotel-room bed table and included in his KGB file, read: "'Did I come here just to find death? I love life."

Two psychiatrists found Oswald "mentally unstable". Former KGB officer Yuri Nosenko, who handled Oswald's case, told Gerald Posner: "It made us feel he should be avoided at all costs."

Even, so, weighing all the risks after Oswald's suicide attempt, high Kremlin officials decided it would be dangerous not to let the ex-marine stay.

Said Nosenko: "'He was so unstable he might ... succeed in killing himself. Then we would be criticised for a KGB murder of an American tourist."

Too much was at stake. Several weeks earlier, Eisenhower and Khrushchev had thawed the Cold War at a summit in the Maryland countryside, and the Kremlin did not want "the spirit of Camp David" jeopardised.

LOVERS: Oswald and Marina in Minsk. She would later become his wife.

Oswald was granted asylum and sent to work in Minsk. The local KGB officer was ordered to watch him but not recruit him as an agent. Recalls Nosenko: "The KGB didn't want Oswald from day one."

MYTH: SHAGGY DOG STORY

NOT one witness gave a contemporaneous statement about a second gunman at Dealey Plaza. However, ever since that day, new witnesses have stepped forward, sometimes many years later, claiming to have seen the real assassin. Some people have even confessed to being the phantom "Grassy Knoll shooter".

Perhaps no witness to the Grassy Knoll shooter has received more ink than Jean Hill, who was standing on the southern side of Elm St as Kennedy's car passed.

Cited in books and articles and the author of her own book, *The Last Dissenting Witness*, Hill often speaks on television and at Kennedy assassination forums. She used to carry calling cards bragging that she was the "closest witness" to the President at the time of the fatal head shot. Oliver Stone gave her character a prominent role in the movie *JFK*.

On the day of the assassination, she gave a statement to the sheriff's office saying that the President and the First Lady had "a white, fluffy dog" between them, that some men in plain clothes had returned fire once the shooting began (no one, in fact, returned fire) and that she saw a "man running toward the monument" on the other side of the plaza and had started running after him.

Over the years that portion of her story has changed dramatically. She soon was saying that when she chased the man her attention was drawn "to a trail of blood in the grass".

ON FILM: Jean Hill (circled).

She followed it, she said, in the belief that the man had been shot by a policeman. At the time, investigators found nothing more notable than drops left by a Sno-Cone of flavoured crushed ice.

Photographs taken by Wilma Bond, another Dealey witness, undermine this account. One photo shows a large bus at the tail end of the motorcade passing out of the square. Most of the entire motorcade had left, yet Hill can be seen still in her original position, not yet having taken a step to cross the road to chase anyone as she claimed.

What's more, Hill was interviewed within half-an-hour of the assassination by a local television crew. Asked if she saw anyone or anything that drew her attention, she said, unequivocally, "No."

Over the years, her story changed. By 1986, she was saying, "I saw a man fire from behind the wooden fence. I saw a puff of smoke and some sort of movement on the Grassy Knoll where he was."

In 1989, she added "a flash of light" to her scenario.

MYTH: THE UMBRELLA MAN

ON the day of the assassination, a man near the presidential motorcade opened and closed a black umbrella as the shots rang out.

Some conspiracy buffs, such as Robert Cutler, publisher of the *Grassy Knoll Gazette*, averred that the umbrella contained a poisoned flechette (a small dart) that struck the President in the throat and neutralised him while a team of five assassins went to work and finished the job.

Jim Marrs and film-maker Oliver Stone suggested that the "umbrella man" gave a signal to the team of assassins waiting in ambush.

The truth is less melodramatic — and has been a matter of public record since 1978. The House Select Committee on Assassinations located the umbrella man after publishing a drawing made from photographs (he is glimpsed on the Zapruder film) and asking for public assistance in finding him.

Louis Witt, who did not even know he was the subject of such controversy, still had the same umbrella and explained that he had gone to Dealey Plaza to heckle the President with an accessory that had been a symbol of appeasement since the rainy day in 1938 when Neville Chamberlain returned from his disastrous negotiations with Hitler in Munich.

THE COURIER-MAIL

— SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1993

SPECIAL REPORT

THE ASSASSIN

President Kennedy's assassination has generated a flourishing tourist industry in Dallas. MICK BROWN meets the people who prosper from the conspiracy theory.

THE first thing to hit you is the shock wave of familiarity. You have never been there before, but you recognise it instantly, a picture swimming into focus like a print in a developing tray.

The solid red-brick building of the Texas School Book Depository, seven storeys high, stands in one corner of Dealey Plaza. This is where Lee Harvey Oswald is alleged to have hidden himself, to shoot the President. To its left is the pergola, glowing bone-white in the sulphurous Dallas sunshine, and beyond that the picket fence. This is the Grassy Knoll.

It is important to fix these landmarks in the mind to picture that moment when the clock stopped at 12.30pm on Friday, November 22, 1963: the slow crawl of the presidential motorcade as it came down Maine St, turned right on to Union, along the top of Dealey Plaza, and then dog-legged again on to Elm — an angle of 90deg, which brought the presidential limousine almost to a halt — to move slowly on past the Texas School Book Depository.

"By my calculation," says Gary, pointing to the middle lane of the three-lane road, "it was right there. Nine inches to the right of that oil spot. That's where Kennedy took the fatal shot."

You look around. The low white wall across the road, by the pergola; that's where Abraham Zapruder, a 58-year-old dress manufacturer, stood with his 8mm home-movie

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ASSASSINATION BUSINESS

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camera, to film the motorcade as it passed; the film which shows Kennedy's head snapping back as if the shot were being fired not from the Book Depository behind him but from the Grassy Knoll in front.

MURDER MYSTERY. Most of the witnesses who stood on the Grassy Knoll, or on the lawn opposite, have been accounted for. There was Howard Brennan, Bill Newman, Beverly Oliver "the Babushka Lady" and Jean Hill — the woman in the bright red raincoat, whose boyfriend was Bobby Hargis, one of the police outriders, who had to scrape part of the President's brain off the visor of his motorcycle helmet. There was, more mysteriously, "the Cuban" and "the Umbrella Man".

"I think this is what happens," says Dan. "When the shot hits Kennedy in the head, the Umbrella Man stands up and turns his umbrella. I think he's signalling for more shots to come from behind the picket fence."

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy is probably, as Larry Howard, the director of the Kennedy Assassination Information Center, puts it with undisguised hyperbole, "the greatest murder mystery of the century"; possibly, as he declares, "the biggest cover-up in world history".

No event has provoked as much speculation, inquiry and rumour, or fostered an industry quite so prolific and lucrative.

It has also spawned an industry of the macabre. The death of Kennedy has become Dallas's principal tourist attraction. By 10.30 each morning, the first sightseers have drifted on to the Grassy Knoll, and Gary and Dan are already hard at work, hawking copies of the conspiracy newspaper, the *Kennedy Quarterly*, and their own version of history.

THE FATAL SHOTS. "We're the three obsessives," says Gary. "Dan knows things I don't know. I know things Dan doesn't know. He's into ideology, world trade, big banks, shadow government. I'm into practicalities."

And the third? "Bob Goodman," says Gary. "Bob is into everything."

The *Kennedy Quarterly*, which one buys from the vendors of the Grassy Knoll, lists 60 separate assassination theories. As conspiracy theories should be, all of these plots are labyrinthine in their complexity. The same suspects recur. The mafia, the CIA, the military-industrial complex; Texas oilmen; pro-Castro Cubans; anti-Castro Cubans, J. Edgar Hoover, LBJ, southern racists, the joint chiefs of staff, or any combination of the above.

It took 26 years for the city of Dallas sufficiently to come to terms with what happened next to open a museum commemorating the event. The Sixth Floor, as it is called, occupies the floor of the Texas School Book Depository building from where Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly fired the shots that killed Kennedy.

One thing more than any other has been responsible for raising the temperature of speculation to fever pitch: Oliver Stone's film *JFK*, made in 1991, and based on the book, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, by New Orleans prosecutor Jim Garrison. *JFK*, which suggested that Kennedy had been murdered by a conspiracy led by disgruntled CIA operatives, provided a shot of adrenalin into the flagging assassination industry.

Since the release of *JFK*, attendance at the Sixth Floor museum has increased by 30 percent. Before the film you would find perhaps 20 or 30 people a day mooching around the Grassy Knoll. Now, says Gary, there are around 100 people on a bad day; up to 1000 on a good one.

Business has also flourished on the Kennedy Assassination Bus Tour, run by a man named Bob Kintzle. Bob's mission is more entrepreneurial than a quest for truth. Living in Chicago, he had taken a tour of famous gangster sites and thought a similar idea might work in Dallas. He moved his family to the city, acquired an old bus, and started boning up on conspiracy theories.

The tour follows the route of the presidential motorcade through Dallas, to Dealey Plaza. There it picks up the trail of Lee Harvey Oswald, retracing the route he was supposed to have taken immediately after the assassination from the Book Depository, via bus and taxi, over the old viaduct to his rooming house on North Beckley. It moves on to the spot where Oswald allegedly shot the Dallas policeman, Officer Tippit; the Texas Theater where he was arrested later that afternoon; the police headquarters where he was shot dead by Jack Ruby.

There are perhaps 20 people on the tour on the day I take it. Not one of them believes that Oswald acted alone.

"You want my opinion," says Gary. "I think Oswald was innocent. He didn't even fire a shot. The time sequence was wrong. The paraffin tests came back negative. The angle doesn't make sense."

Who then did Gary think was responsible? He looks around nervously. "We're in Dallas. I don't talk about that. I keep it factual."

Gary was 12 and at school in Cupertino, California, when Kennedy was killed. "Our teacher was called outside. He came in, told us to close our books and said, 'The President of the United States has been shot.' We had an early lunch." Since then, the assassination has stuck to him like a bad cold. Two years ago he gave up his job in computers and came to Dallas. Now he spends each day on the Grassy Knoll talking and selling copies of the *Kennedy Quarterly*. Even his wife thinks he's nuts.

"The more I learn each day, the more stupid I feel. I gave up speaking to people about seven years ago because I got bored talking about it myself."

This is not strictly true. Gary talks of nothing else. But I can see that my questions make him uneasy. "Who did you say you were with?" he asks for the second time in half an hour.

Gary offers his own assassination tour. This is conducted not in a converted bus, but in the beaten-up Samurai four-wheel drive that brought him from California.

The tour starts behind the Grassy Knoll, at an entrance to a storm drain, which, Gary says, a gunman might or might not have used to make his escape. The tour proceeds at a snail's pace down the freeway (the Samurai unable to get out of second gear) to a patch of wasteland more than a kilometre away, where the storm drain emerges into an open concrete channel.

"He'd have needed to be a very small man," says Gary, as we stand looking contemplatively into the black hole. Did I know, he asks, that on the afternoon of the assassination, three men, including a very small man wearing very dirty clothes, had been stopped driving through Ferris, Texas — 112km from Dallas — at 128km/h. They showed Secret Service credentials, and drove away. I say I didn't know that. "Interesting," says Gary.

MACABRE TOURS. We follow the route that Oswald had taken in a taxi from the Book Depository, to his boarding house ("It cost 95¢"). The cab dropped Oswald five blocks beyond his home, and he had to

FATAL ATTRACTION: Every day tourists stop outside the house where Lee Harvey Oswald lived.

walk back. "Why?" asks Gary.

I confess, I have no idea.

Number 1026 North Beckley, where Oswald lived, is still a boarding house; a single-storey building with a sign outside saying "Bedrooms for rent". I walk up and ring the doorbell.

A plump, grey-haired woman in her late 60s answers the door. Mrs Johnson says her mother had owned the house when Oswald lived there. Mrs Johnson herself had been out of town at the time. "He was here less than a month. I never saw him, never knew him . . ." It is clear that for Mrs Johnson, having a tangential connection to history had long since become a nuisance.

"We closed the home right after the assassination happened because we had a trail of people coming in. I can understand the fascination. Until we get some answers, people will always be fascinated. We get letters all the time from people wanting to come. We don't even answer them."

"Interesting," says Gary, as we walk away. "Very interesting. Mrs Johnson never usually talks to anyone." Gary's suspicions about me are multiplying by the minute.

We climb back into the Samurai, crawl up Beckley and take a left on Patton, to the junction of 10th St. This is the spot where Oswald was alleged to have shot Officer Tippit of the Dallas police. The area had gone to hell in the intervening years: dilapidated frame houses, stray dogs, rubbish spilling on to the pavements.

Gary wants to take some measurements. We drive back to Oswald's boarding-house; set the mileometer to zero, and slowly return to the corner of 10th and Patton. It is exactly a mile (1.6km). "The Warren Commission gave Oswald 10 minutes to walk it," says Gary. "He'd have had to run."

From the corner where Oswald shot Officer Tippit to the Texas movie theatre where he was arrested is three-fifths of a mile. "That's supposed to have taken him half an hour. According to eyewitnesses he was out of breath at this point. But why? He could have walked it easily. Why run to the point where he meets Tippit, then walk away from the killing? It doesn't make sense."

We sit outside the Texas Theater in Gary's Samurai. Gary is becoming increasingly agitated. "Can I trust you?" he asks. "I don't know whether I should tell you this or not. I'm going to give you a name you may recognise . . ." He pauses, breathes deeply. Utters the name. It means nothing to me.

"Really?" Gary looks momentarily crestfallen. We return to the Grassy Knoll in silence. "I think I'll know in my lifetime," says Gary, as we climb out of the Samurai, "that loose lips sink ships."

A disconcerting number of witnesses to the assassination are now dead, but the Knoll continues to exert a curious magnetism on the living. Ed Hoffman, a deaf mute who saw two men acting suspiciously behind the picket fence, comes here regularly. So does Jean Hill. Bob Goodman is said to be one of the two unidentified

teenagers standing to the right of the Book Depository when the shots were fired. But Bob Goodman is nowhere to be found.

Harold Norman, who was working in the Book Depository at the time of the shooting, still works in the building, as an attendant at the Sixth Floor. "That's where I was," he says, pointing to a window on the fifth floor of the Depository. "Right under Oswald. Heard three shots; heard the shells drop on the floor. That's what they found, just like I heard it. That's what I told the commission."

FACT OR FICTION. Did he know Oswald? "Yeah, I knew him. He was quiet. A loner." And he saw the killing? "I seen the President clutch his ear like this. I thought he was just waving at people. But man, I'll never forget that. Never forget it..." Norman pauses, as if lost in the memory. "Reckon," he says slowly, "you got at least 10 bucks worth right there."

"You spoke to Harold?" asks Dan when I see him later that afternoon. "Of course, you know they got to him right after the assassination, told him what to say, and he's been saying it ever since."

"What am I supposed to believe, Dan?" I ask him. He gives this some thought. "I have to tell you," he says at last, "that Dan is not my real name."

"Is Gary Gary's real name?" I ask. Dan shrugs. "Probably not."

What about Bob Goodman?

"Bob Goodman's not his real name," says Dan. Where can I find Bob Goodman? "You can't," says Dan. "No one can. He just... drifts in and out.

"You met Larry Howard yet?" Dan asks. Howard runs the Kennedy Assassination Information Center. I say I haven't. "Interesting guy," says Dan. "FBI."

The Kennedy Assassination Information Center is a 10-minute walk from Dealey Plaza, set incongruously amid boutiques selling armadillo T-shirts and tourist trinkets.

Howard has been in the construction business, but had always had an abiding interest in the assassination. He started the Information Center in 1989, as a clearing house for information.

BOMB THREATS. Howard says the Information Center receives between 40 and 50 letters and 20 to 30 telephone calls a day. There was a woman who claimed to have seen Lyndon Johnson walking across the Grassy Knoll with a gun after the assassination; a man who said he could name "all 26" gunmen; a woman who claimed that she was at Dealey Plaza when she was three years old and had thrown a ball-bearing which killed the President.

"A lot of it's crazy," sighs Howard. "People have been living with this for 30 years. Some just go nuts."

Howard's own thesis on the assassination is crisp: John Kennedy effectively committed suicide through the policies he was pursuing. Lee Harvey Oswald was the patsy: he didn't fire a shot. The plot was organised by rogue elements in the CIA, with the mafia as junior partner. Allen Dulles, Lyndon Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover were all complicit in the cover-up.

There is something oddly soothing about talking to Howard. Here is a man who has spent most of his adult life inside the hall of mirrors, who has assimilated all the theories; travelled through the outer rings of madness to the very heart of the shadow play, and found some curious calm in its centre.

He is a man tempered by adversity. Since opening the Information Center he has received three bomb threats. A $30,000 bank loan to develop the exhibit has been blocked by the Federal Bank, he says. Plans to move to premises closer to Dealey Plaza have been sabotaged by the Sixth Floor museum. His phones have been tapped. "I've accused the FBI, but they deny it."

I remember what Dan has told me; that Howard himself works for the FBI. Is that true? "Don't believe anything you hear on the Knoll," he chuckles. "I'm not FBI." What is he then?

Howard blinks behind his steel-rimmed spectacles. "What do the initials of Assassination Information Center spell backwards?"